

Living on a Prayer
John 17:6-19
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One of the blessings that has come through for my family and me during these last few weeks is to be on the receiving end of so much prayer. I think prayer is something we often take for granted. Because we can choose to pray at any time and for anyone, I think we forget just what a powerful tool we have at our disposal. To pray for someone is a bold act of faith that has tangible consequences. I believe it is the most powerful thing you can do for someone.

We were blessed to have many, many people praying for us these past few weeks. And we felt it. I've been on the prayer lists for churches I've never visited before, and yet those faithful folks called out my name during Prayer Time. There's something very sacred about having your name lifted up to God. There's something quite holy about a person or a prayer group or a congregation pausing and speaking your name and God's name in the same sentence. You know, it's almost a cliché to say, "I'll be praying for you," or "You'll be in my prayers." Don't say those words lightly. When someone says that to me, I take them at their word, and I expect them to follow through. Because prayer does make a difference.

James 5 tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. If that's true – if the prayers you and I send up are powerful and effective – what does that tell us about the prayers of Jesus? Although we know Jesus prayed a lot, we don't get a very thorough look at how Jesus prayed. So this passage today from John gives us the chance to eavesdrop a bit.

We get a sense of what his mission and purpose was here on Earth: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world." That New Jerusalem version translates this, "I have revealed your name to them." We've talked about the significance of this before, but I think it bears repeating so that we can understand the magnitude of what's been accomplished through Jesus' ministry.

In the Hebrew culture, to know someone's name was to know more than simply what they were called. A person's name represented their identity, their character. So Jacob's name meant "the deceiver," until it was changed to Israel, which meant "strives with God." We are told by Isaiah that the Messiah will be called Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Knowing a person's name meant knowing the person in an intimate, personal sense. So to know God's name was to know more than what God was called; it was to know what God was like, God's essence and character.

The problem with that was that the Jews believed that God's name was so sacred – "hallowed be thy name" – that no one could know it. There are no vowels in Hebrew alphabet. God's name was written as YHWH, pronounced in English as Yahweh. These four letters together were thought to be so sacred, that when the reader came to them, she would substitute a different word for Lord, usually the name "adonai". The holy name for God was so sacred that people were not even supposed to know it, much less speak it.

That's why Moses' boldness is so shocking in Exodus 3 when he asks God for God's name so that he can tell the Israelites who is saving them. Do you remember what God said? "Tell them 'I AM' sent you." God is known to them as the great "I AM."

Fast forward to Jesus' life in John's Gospel. One of the distinctive features of this gospel is a set of sayings from Jesus. "I am the bread of life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the true vine." You see what he's doing here? Through these sayings and his teachings and ministry, he is revealing God's name to us. We come to know what God is like by looking at Jesus. In his time, you weren't supposed to speak God's name. But Jesus spoke it to us in such a way that now all of us can speak it. Jesus is saying: "I have told you God's name; the sacred name can now be spoken because of what I have done. I have brought God so close to you that even the most ordinary of people can speak to him and take their name upon his lips."

This transference of authority from Jesus to us is important, because Jesus knew he wasn't going to be around much longer to lead his disciples. He says, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world." And his prayer for the disciples is this: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one." Through Jesus' prayer, we are made one based on our faith in Christ and given the name of God to speak out loud. We are brought together, this rag-tag collection of human beings, because of Christ's invitation, even though the people he puts us alongside may well be, as C.S. Lewis puts it, "that very selection of neighbors we have been avoiding all week."

That idea of our unity in the midst of our diversity was a driving force behind the founding of our denomination, and continues to be an important part of being the church because of what we have been called to do. We are called to come together as the body of Christ and carry on Jesus' work in the world. We are called to come together and speak the sacred name – in worship, in prayer, in how we live our lives. In fact, Jesus makes clear in this prayer whom his focus is: "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given to me."

At first, this may seem a bit selfish or exclusionary. Why wouldn't Jesus pray for the world? Doesn't he care? Of course he does, but we have to understand what he means here. The term "the world" is not a neutral term in John's gospel. "The world" represents everything in existence that works against the will of God. "The world" represents human selfishness and arrogance that repeatedly rejects God's work.

This doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't love the world. Quite the opposite. I think he chooses not to pray for the world, because the only hope for the world is if it stopped being the world! The world, in John's understanding, is so corrupt and faithless and destructive that its only hope is to not exist, which kind of defeats the purpose of everything. So instead of praying for the world, Jesus prays for those who are about to be sent out into it.

He says, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the Evil One." On the surface, that doesn't seem too fair. Wouldn't it be easy for us if Jesus had prayed for us to be removed from evil instead of just protected from it? Why pray that we would be subjected to the world's temptations and trials and illnesses and disappointments? Why not pray that we are whisked away to a billowy white cloud and given wings and a harp, far from this world around us?

Because of all people, Jesus knows that God's mission ongoing mission is not accomplished by running away from the world, but by running into it. No one will hear us speak God's name if our back is turned and we're heading the other direction. This

world needs to hear God's name, needs to know God as we know him, and it is up to us to fulfill that mission, to carry on Jesus' work of glorifying God here in this world.

Jesus never prayed that we might find escape; instead, he prays that we might find victory. He insists that it is in the rough and tumble of life that a person must live out their Christianity. Our faith was never meant to withdraw us from life, but to better equip us for it. It doesn't offer a release from our problems, but a way to conquer them. It doesn't offer a life where troubles are escaped, but where they are overcome.

That is the simple but profound fact of a life of faith: God is more revealed through us by what we suffer and endure than by what we achieve and accomplish. God is made more real to me when I see what someone has overcome, than when I see how someone has gotten ahead. We are called to speak God's name, and that name rings through most powerfully when spoken with confidence in the midst of despair, when spoken with faith in the midst of a trial. Every prayer offered is another chance to speak God's name, to make known the glory of God in our lives.

This is not an easy calling Jesus is giving us here, which is why I'm so glad he puts it in the form of a prayer instead of a list of instructions. You see, he's not saying, "OK, faithful followers, here's what you need to do..." He's saying, "Heavenly Father, I pray that you do this for them." Jesus knew the dangers of leaving our future in our hands. Can you imagine how disastrous that would have been? He's not giving out last-minute advice here; he's basically taking this whole divinely-inspired, human-led endeavor and laying it at God's feet. We are not in our own hands. We are in God's hands, and those are some wonderfully gentle, wonderfully powerful hands.

Jesus says in this prayer, "I have worked hard for you, Father. I have done everything in my power to reveal your name and to bring you glory. Now, I'm leaving. I'm not leaving behind much. I have won over only a few very ordinary, very human people. But I know, Father, that if you are in these eleven, they will change the world."

Now, Jesus is looking at us, and praying, "Father, I've worked hard through this congregation. They are only about 350 or so people; not much compared to the world out there. But I know, Father, that if you are in these 350 people, they will change the world."

Will we? Will we? We are a community for whom Jesus prays. Jesus is praying for us. With that in mind, no matter what we face, no matter what life holds, we are called to do one simple thing, regardless of the circumstances. Speak the name. Speak the name.